NEW POLITICAL HORIZONS:
BEYOND THE "DEMOCRATIC" NATION-STATE

In these pages, I describe the oligarchic and oppressive nature of the "democratic" nation-state, exposing the contemporary forms of domination enacted behind the cloak of "democracy". I then explore the conditions under which people — already living beyond the "democratic" nation-state — rule themselves. Finally, I describe current initiatives advancing in this direction.

The original sins of "democracy" and their consequences

The "democracy" born in the West was in open contradiction with the democratic idea of people ruling themselves. "Democratic" Greek men fiercely discriminated against women, slaves and "barbarians"[1]. For Aristotle, Greek democracy, like tyranny or oligarchy, could never seek the common good. In fact, he offered several arguments against any form of government by the majority (Bishop 1989).

The political regime that became the universal model for the modern nation-state was not conceived as democratic. For the Federalists[2], placing the government of the American Union in the hands of "the people" would be irresponsible. If "the multitude" held power, demagogues would control the country and induce fragmentation: rather than a Union, a group of small states would likely arise. Sharing Aristotle's preoccupations, the American Founding Fathers devised a regime, a republic, which preserved power in the hands of a small elite group while granting only certain limited functions to some sectors of "the people" (Hamilton et al. 2000; see also Ellis 2002 and Jennings 2000).

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[1] The Greek classified as "barbarian" any person that did not speak a Greek tongue or did not have the same "moral qualities" attributed to the Greek. This attitude can be seen as one of the roots of the colonial mindset universally adopted by Westerners.

[2] At the end of the 18th century, there was a very intense public discussion about the ratification of the US Constitution. Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison, equivocally known as "the Federalists", were very prominent in the debate. Their 81 articles and essays were published as *The Federalist Papers.* *http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/documents/1786-1800/the-federalist-papers/* (7 December 2019).

This republic would only be declared a democracy half a century later, when slavery was formally abolished. Neither the country's change of name nor the amendments to the US constitution, however, eliminated the racist, sexist, classist character or the oligarchic and oppressive nature of the regime that subsequently became the universal model of "democracy". In addition to these traits, the colonial seal of Western tradition also shaped the nation-state. Particularly after the Enlightenment, Westerners assumed they had a "civility" found lacking in certain "other" peoples, especially in the colonies. "Civilising" others for their own good— if even through violently brutal means — became imperative.

In Europe, substituting unbearable monarchies with a softer, more disguised oligarchy won out as more attractive. Out of a tacit acceptance of a lesser evil, however, a certain fascination gradually emerged in many places; the belief that the modern nation-state was truly democratic grew among a great number of people. They also believed that certain adjustments would remove its oligarchic or most oppressive expressions. Today, no one would seriously argue that people rule their own lives under the current system. Now, the idea that this kind of sociopolitical organisation is truly democratic is perceived as a gigantic hoax, a foolish illusion and an instrument of domination: it produces the opposite of what it promises.

The extinction of the nation-state and the exhaustion of capitalism

The modern nation-state took shape in 1648, with the Peace of Westphalia[3]. The idea acquired its conceptual and political force during the French Revolution when it was combined with nationalism, displacing or disqualifying previous concepts and practices of state and nation. The nation-state, moreover, was soon perceived as the fullest embodiment of the industrial

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[3] A series of treaties in 1648 ended the wars of religion in Europe, including the Thirty Years' War. While the contractual element had already entered the civic space in part of Europe by the thirteenth century, the treaties gave formal institutional status to the emerging concept of the state in Europe. See Nandy 2010 and its very rich bibliography for a brief characterisation of the modern nation-state.

mode of production, which in turn was presented as the natural culmination of humanity: the zenith of progress.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the modern nation-state, the political form of capitalism, was sharply criticised. However, no amount of criticism would break its hegemony over academics, intellectuals and large sections of society.

Despite capitalism's global vocation, expressed in all forms of colonialism and imperialism, the nation-state was always the main arena enabling capitalist expansion. In the latter part of the 20th century, however, national borders increasingly posed an obstacle. Macro-national structures like the European Union, designed for the free movement of capital and commodities, did not solve the problem. Consequently, neoliberal globalisation began to erode the substance of the nation-state. The main function of the nation-state's governments — namely the administration of the national economy — became impossible, with all economies being exposed to transnational movements beyond the control of individual nations. While national rituals and nation-states themselves still persist as points of reference, their raison d'être and the material substance giving them reality have disappeared.

The progressive dissolution of the "democratic nation-state" (Agamben et al. 2019) is also a consequence of the fact that capitalism has come up against its own internal limits. Since the 1970s, the so-called "neoliberal revolution" has brought about political, economic and technological changes that have dismantled, at a global level, the social advances accumulated over 200 years of worker struggle. The repercussions are evident everywhere: dwindling employment levels, lower salaries, reduced fringe benefits and deteriorating public services. Some countries and regions are more severely affected than others. As Piketty (2014 and 2015) and Oxfam's reports[4] highlight, unprecedented levels of inequality have been created: worldwide, 1% of the

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[4] Every year, Oxfam releases a report on the state of inequality, titled *Reward Work, Not Wealth*, to coincide with the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland. https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/reward-work-not-wealth (7 December 2019).

population own more wealth than the other 99% combined, and fewer than 30 individuals hold more wealth between them than almost four billion of the world's poorest people.

Most of what is produced in the world today still has a capitalist character, but capital can no longer resort to the mechanism that drives it, namely the investment of profits in the expansion of production by purchasing labour and balancing every labour-reducing increase in productivity with an equivalent increase in production. For these and other reasons, the worldwide reproduction of the capitalist system is no longer feasible.[5] Capitalism's evolution has, in effect, killed the goose that laid the golden eggs.

In 1995, at a meeting of the State of the World Forum in San Francisco, economic and political leaders like Mikhail Gorbachev, George Bush, Margaret Thatcher, Václav Havel, Bill Gates and Ted Turner began to talk about a 20:80 world, namely the idea that once the technological revolution is complete, only 20% of the population will be necessary for production.[6] In reality, it appears that a new social class has been created: disposable human beings, sometimes described as The Precariat (Standing 2011). In the past, the unemployed fulfilled a certain function for capital. They were its industrial reserve army. Now, capital has no use for this new class. Political and economic leaders are continually redefining the "surplus population", incorporating ever more new groups of expendable humans.

Barbarism has become the norm. Speculation, dispossession and compulsive destruction are replacing production as a source of accumulation of

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[5] There is a growing body of literature examining the current condition of capitalism. For many years, Wallerstein warned that capitalism's "terminal phase" started in 1968 (2011). Robert Kurz (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2012, 2013) and the group Krisis (and later Exit!) began developing a solid analysis of the end of capitalism in the 1990s, while Moishe Postone (1996) and Anselm Jappe (2005, 2017a, 2017b; Jappe/Latouche, 2015) have continued the analysis in this century. See also Agamben (2019), Harvey (2014) and Holloway (2002, 2010, 2016).

[6] At the meeting, Zbigniew Brzeziński coined the word *tittytainment* (a blend of "tit" and "entertainment") to allude to what the excluded 80% should receive. https://www.facebook.com/notes/stop-the-war/tittytainment-the-word-tittytainment-was-coined-for-the-first-time-in-1995-by-th/380342564403/ (18 September 2019).

wealth and power. The democratic façade is no longer useful.[7] Of the old design of the nation-state, only the dispositives[8] for direct and indirect control of the population remain. The use of new technologies may usher in the extension of such oppressive control to previously unimaginable aspects and spheres of daily life (see, for example, Zuboff 2019). [9]

One pillar of the "democratic" nation-state — the "rule of law" — was the culmination of 200 years of struggle for civil rights and democratic freedoms. Today, it is being replaced by a declared or undeclared state of exception (emergency) (Agamben 2005, 2015), Everywhere, new laws are being used to normalise illegality and impunity for ever greater numbers of crimes; Mexico and the US are good examples of this general condition. Instead of the rule **OF** law — common norms properly enforced — we are increasingly under the rule **BY** law.

The dominant, irresponsible forms of production and consumption have wrought environmental destruction tantamount to extreme abuses of the most basic common sense. "Global warming" and "climate change" have become mere euphemisms. The entire planet is on fire, not just the Amazon, California and Australia. The climate we had has been destroyed, and we know nothing about the compatibility of human life with the emerging climate (McKibben 1989, 2019).

In the wake of rapid technological, environmental and social changes, new forms of political domination are emerging. Political leaders with an open anti-democratic vocation and even fascist propensities are currently being

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[7] Capitalism has operated in all sorts of dictatorial regimes, but the so-called "democratic nation-state" was the preferred political form for the operation of the "free market".

[8] Here and in other parts of the essay, I use the Foucauldian notion of *dispositive,* a heterogeneous set of elements with a strategic function (Foucault 1980a, 194). For Agamben (2009: 14), a dispositive is "anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings".

[9] Many "new technologies", like quantic supremacy, are not yet operational. For the time being, governments and special agencies are increasing the use of probabilities to handle the enormous masses of data they are already collecting. 5G, the fifth generation of cellular phones, should be included in the current prospects.

elected or re-elected, or are at least ascendant. They pretend to embody the general discontent, promising to dismantle "the system"; once in power, they fail to keep their word, instead reinforcing and widening the system's oligarchic elements. They enjoy broad support, especially among those most affected by the state of affairs, convincing disgruntled voters that the authoritarian option is the best hope for remedying all their ills and eliminating the causes of their discontent.

However, labelling new authoritarian regimes like Orbán's in Hungary or Bolsonaro's in Brazil as "fascist" only creates confusion, though many of fascism's features are re-emerging within dramatically different historical contexts. We are witnessing a resurgence in appeals to patriotic emotions as a "raison d'état" across Europe, the United States and Latin America. New nationalist discourses are disconnected from authentic national projects. "Hungarian sovereignty", Brexit and "Make America Great Again" are prime examples of the new political use of patriotic emotions.

Additionally, the emergence of a survivor consciousness is now encouraged, with an implicit acceptance that there will be groups of people hopelessly doomed to disappear; everywhere, the role of the "to-be-disappeared" is mainly assigned to migrants. People now cling onto leaders to whom messianic abilities are attributed, viewing them as singularly equipped to steady the ship within a storm now dooming all. Trump, Orbán, Bolsonaro, Modi and Johnson all exemplify this phenomenon. Increasingly, people cleave desperately to fundamentalisms — spiritual, religious, or political — even as the ideas and institutions in which they trusted dissolve before their disbelieving eyes. "Democracy" is being "democratically" dismantled almost everywhere (see Santos 2007).

Radicalising discontent

The 21st century is now characterised by the proliferation of discontent, even in the most unexpected places. No space of social reality is immune. Even those who have concentrated an obscene proportion of wealth in their hands

recognise the instability and dangers inherent in the current state of affairs.

The rebel spirit of the 1960s was still present in many of the mobilisations emerging in the decades that followed, particularly in Europe. The Alternative Forum in Berlin (1988), the campaign marking 500 years of resistance in Latin America (1992), the Earth counter-summit (Rio, 1992) and the creation of Via Campesina (1993) were all born of reactions against the globalisation of neoliberal capitalism and the New World Order. Most anti-systemic movements acknowledge that the Zapatista rebellion (Chiapas, Mexico, 1994) provoked a global awakening. The European marches of the 1990s, the creation of the People's Global Action Against Free Trade and the WTO (Geneva, 1998), and popular movements like Reclaim the Streets in the UK encapsulate the political climate of the period.

The 1999 Battle of Seattle, when nearly 40,000 protesters converged against the Millennium Round of the World Trade Organization (WTO), is often used as a reference point for the anti-globalisation movement. Since then, "counter-summits" have been held to challenge every meeting of the WTO and many other international organisations.

In the wake of the Battle of Seattle, new waves of popular demonstrations articulately expressed a diversity of discontent with the dominant system, and particularly with representative democracy. "Let them all go!" said the Argentines in 2001. Ten years later, the Indignados in Spain scathingly remarked that "my dreams do not fit in your ballot box" while the Greeks announced that they would not leave the squares they occupied until "they" were out. Occupy Wall Street stood strong in New York: "you have demands when you trust that governments can meet them. That's why we don't have them." Since October 2018, the "yellow vests" in France have radically rejected all systems of representation. In 2019, mobilisations in Lebanon sought to abolish all "political classes" while movements in Latin America openly challenged their governments.

Beyond "democratic oligarchy"

In the nation-state, the power of the people is usually transferred to a small minority of the electorate, whose votes decide the party that will exercise government power (no more than 25% of the electorate appoints the president of the United States). A tiny group, generally recruited from the elite, promulgates laws and makes all major decisions (Archipiélago 1992). "Political alternation" or "democratic checks and balances" are an ineffective remedy to such an inherently oligarchic structure.

In the 20th century, initiatives to make the system less oligarchic arose in response to the undemocratic elements of all versions of "indirect democracy" constructed after the American model. So far, however, these additions have been unable to change the nature of the regime.[10]

Historical experience highlights the limits of the liberal/modern representative "democracy" associated with the nation-state. In no country where it reigns do people actually rule their lives, regardless of the "democratic" dispositives introduced. Rule by the few prevails in all of them. The oligarchy inherent in every form of "representative democracy" has thus become undeniable.

From time immemorial, small groups of people have ruled themselves, freely conceiving and practising the norms of their modes of living and dying in their localised settings. This democratic idea has been a principle of social organisation throughout human history, in the most diverse cultures and circumstances. However, that which is called democracy today does not correspond to that notion of democratic self-rule.

Modern institutions are counterproductive to their stated aims because

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[10] Mechanisms found within the model referred to as "participatory democracy" include the *initiative* (direct submission of bills by citizens), the *referendum* (direct approval, by popular vote, of laws, policies or public decisions), the *recall* and *consultations*. In some systems of "participatory democracy", such as those found in Switzerland or California, citizens are irritated by the number of issues on which they must vote, often without sufficient information or knowledge. In other cases, the dispositives can be used as dictatorial instruments. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, for instance, uses consultations and similar tools to impose what he calls "illiberal democracy". "Participatory democracy" is also called "direct democracy" (Cronin 1989), but here, this expression is used to allude to different forms of self-rule by the people, not to liberal/representative democracy.

they operate at a scale and under conditions that lead inevitably to the betrayal of their raison d'être, as Ivan Illich warned half a century ago (Illich 1971, 1973, 1974, 1976). What he anticipated is entirely evident today. However, every betrayal is misinterpreted as a mere defect in the institutions or their operators, which can be corrected with techno-fixes, marginal reforms or staff changes.

"Democratic institutions" are an excellent illustration of this counterproductivity. Today, all social and political decisions are made by corporations and the politicians that do their bidding, not by the people. It is in fact corporations that rule the world. For Illich, political majorities are fictitious groups of people with very different interests, unable to reasonably express the common good. He explained why democracy will not be able to survive the use that corporations can make of laws and democratic procedures to establish their empires. In his view, the modern nation-state has become the holding corporation for a multiplicity of groups, each of which serves its own interests; periodically, political parties gather shareholders to appoint a board of directors. In the face of disaster, institutions lose respectability, legitimacy and the reputation of serving the public interest (Illich 1973: 102-109).

Disasters are now the order of the day. The world we knew is falling apart around us. We are increasingly immersed in sociopolitical and environmental chaos, taking us beyond naked horror. Until recently, most people believed that the electoral procedure expressed — with honesty, transparency and effectiveness — people's collective will and their shared concern for the common good. They also believed that the representatives elected through the dominant procedures of the day were appointed to serve them — to defend their interests and promote their well-being. The fact, almost always evident, that things do not work that way was commonly attributed to circumstantial failures. As with every ritual, failures increase faith in the myth rather than weakening it. If it does not rain, those who participate in the rain dance will dance with ever greater intensity and fervour, never once doubting the validity of the ritual. The ritual generates faith, not vice versa. Such has been the case, until recently, with "democracy". Today, however, it is next to

impossible to find people convinced that they are ruling themselves and furthering the common good through the electoral procedures and political games of the nation-state. As Illich warned, most institutions have lost legitimacy, respectability and the reputation of serving the public interest.

Many people still use the ballot box, with different motives, purposes and convictions. They may use it to express their rejection of the government or the dominant party, or for circumstantial purposes or particular interests. Many people still think that they can exert some degree of influence on public policies or the general orientation of the government through their votes or through political parties. But the main democratic institution has already vanished: the general conviction that the people effectively rule their society.

Grassroots insurrections

Be it in the name of old ideals or simply in order to survive, ordinary women and men at the grassroots — the salt of the earth — are adopting new political horizons reaching beyond the nation-state and the dominant political mentality. Rather than social movements, they are societies in movement (Zibechi 2017, 2019). The expression "radical democracy" may reflect what people are weaving at the grassroots. Going to the root of the democratic idea, "radical democracy" does not attribute roles of protection or service to abstract state institutions: the root of all legitimate power can only be the people themselves (Lummis 1996). For an increasing number of people, no dispositive that transfers or concentrates such power in any form of representation can be truly democratic.

While it remains impossible to characterise and classify effectively all initiatives being birthed, most of them share a common rejection of the patriarchal, statist, capitalist, racist, sexist, caste-ist and anthropocentric roots of the dominant regime. Their common "NO!" opens to a plurality of "YESes!", to radically diverse paths and life choices (Escobar 2008, 2018; Khotari et al. 2019).

Grassroots initiatives for people's rule usually start in areas or aspects of

everyday life where the people can no longer get what they had before and where they can themselves take action to address the new challenges. Instead of the conventional names — the nouns "food", "education", "health", and so on — denoting "needs" that people depend on institutions to satisfy, ordinary women and men are recovering verbs that refer to personal and collective agency. "Eating", "learning", "healing" and "dwelling", for instance, allude to autonomous modes of living, juxtaposing old traditions with contemporary innovations. Modern "needs" have been created by the dominant systems, in the tradition of the enclosure of the commons that gave birth to capitalism. Deprived of their commons, commoners were transmogrified into modern, "needy men", immediately and infinitely needing food, dwellings, jobs, and so on.[11]

Eating[12]

In these times of global fear, wrote the Uruguayan poet Eduardo Galeano, "whoever doesn't fear hunger is afraid of eating."[13] Hunger is among us once more: almost one billion people currently go to bed with empty stomachs. Famines reminiscent of the Middle Ages are reappearing, while the dominant agricultural systems provide toxic foods that people fear.

Neither the market nor the state can be counted upon to provide solutions: responsibility for mass hunger, food toxicity and enormous amounts of wasted food lies chiefly at their door. People need to do something if they are to avoid starvation or eat without fear, and they are doing it. They are freeing their kitchens and their intestines from the control of corporations. Via Campesina, the largest people's organisation in human history, has been redefining food sovereignty since 1996. By its standards, food sovereignty consists in defining what we eat ourselves, and producing it ourselves too. The

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[11] See, in particular, Illich 2010.

[12] See The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2009, issued by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

[13] From Eduardo Galeano's poem Global Fear. Available at: https://reader-list.sarai.narkive.com/4pTXfJtw/global-fear-by-eduardo-galeano.

organisation defends these ideas in the relevant forums, influencing public policy while advancing autonomous food production and self-sufficiency. Small producers, mainly women, feed 70% of the world's population today. Agribusiness, which controls more than half of the planet's food resources, feeds only 30% (ETC Group 2017 and Via Campesina).[14]

Community gardens are multiplying on an impressive scale. Community spaces that produce and distribute food for free are becoming ever more numerous. Cuba's capital Havana is a textbook example of the potential of urban farming: 60% of the food consumed in the city is produced right there. Direct arrangements between urban consumers and farmers, which apparently started in Japan and Germany, are now everywhere.

These examples are just the proverbial tip of the food iceberg. Grassroots initiatives with very modest beginnings are coming together and are starting to have collective expressions that reflect an increasingly relevant conceptual and political shift. Old agrarian claims are being retaken and people are restoring their relationship with Mother Earth, which is no longer transmogrified into a marketable commodity or "resource" (Shiva 2010) desecrated by public and private developers.

Learning

Many disadvantaged children who are entering schools at present will never attain the level identified by their countries as the minimum for compulsory education. They will continue to suffer discrimination as a result. Those who do manage to gain certificates — putting in considerable effort and incurring substantial debt in the process — will be faced with high unemployment rates. Besides, the market doles out jobs with little or no regard to what has been studied. Dispersed and chaotic forms of education, enabled by new technologies, severely affect the development of children and youth.

People worldwide are resisting the dismantling of public education,

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[14] https://viacampesina.org/en/ (18 November 2019).

carried out in the guise of government "education reform" programmes. While interesting advances can be seen in those countries that launched their reform processes long before the current wave (e.g. Finland) and alternatives IN education proliferate, alternatives TO education — autonomous forms of learning in freedom — are advancing even further, often under names like homeschooling, self-directed learning, de-schooling and un-schooling. The millions of people participating in such efforts are not part of a movement in the conventional sense of the term. They are just courageously enjoying the learning opportunities that they create beyond the school system and the media. They are also generating new knowledge in non-conventional ways, thereby participating in the generalised insurrection of "disqualified knowledge" (Foucault 1980b: 78-108).

While the information found through internet searches can be overwhelming and misleading[15], it does illustrate an aspect of the current movement. Growing discontent with the methods and outcomes of conventional education — the shaping of minds, emotions and bodies by market and state — is driving widespread searches for alternatives. Many of the learning spaces created in response (e.g. Unitierras in Canada, Catalonia, Colombia, Japan, Mexico and the United States, or Shikshantar School and Swaraj University in India) are basically learning webs and spaces for the exchange of skills and knowledge. Many address specific challenges faced by communities. Fare of the Free Child, for example, is a podcast community centring Black people, Indigenous people and people of colour in liberatory living and learning practices, with a particular focus on unschooling and the Self-Directed Education movement. It explores the fears and costs of raising free black and brown children in a world that tends to diminish, dehumanise and disappear them.[16] The internet offers a vast repository of information on the evolution of

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[15]A quick internet search for "free schools" results in nine million hits. "Home schooling" yields 33 million, and "alternative ways of learning" almost 300 million.
[16] See https://www.raisingfreepeople.com/podcast/ (15 November 2019) and Akila Richards https://www.raisingfreepeople.com/about/ (15 October 2019).

the current movement, plus a wealth of specific examples.[17]

Healing

Evidence of the failings of the health system, and even of it being a "major threat to health" (Illich 1976: 1), abounds: doctors, drugs and hospitals now produce more diseases than those they cure. Iatrogenesis, the word coined by Illich to allude to diseases caused by medical treatment, is now widely used, even by the medical profession.[18] Studies showing that medical errors or prescription drugs are the third leading cause of death in the US and Europe have elicited controversy[19], but the fact is now well known: every family has suffered cases of illness or death directly linked to medical treatments. There is an "opioid crisis" associated with prescription painkillers[20] and old diseases, once thought eliminated, are now reappearing. All of these factors have prompted intensified efforts to reform the system, but these fail to get very far. Even the "pursuit of health" now has a pathogenic character for many.

Today, a vast movement is growing towards de-medicalisation — first for pregnancy and childbirth, in which women are recovering control over their

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[17] See Pat Farenga's page for a long list of resources:
https://www.johnholtgws.com/homeschooling-unschooling-resources (15 November 2019).
For US school choice data:
https://nces.ed.gov/programs/schoolchoice/ind_05.asp (15 November 2019).
About unschooling and social norms: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn/201204/the-challenges-unschooling-report-iii-the-survey (15 November 2019).
[18] Iatrogenic disorders: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4923397/
(15 November 2019).
Drug-induced iatrogenic disorders:
https://www.globalresearch.ca/drug-induced-iatrogenic-disorders-the-third-leading-cause-of-death-in-the-us-and-britain/5626283 (15 November 2019).
[19] Medical errors (250,000 to 440,000 deaths attributed to these in the US):
https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/22/medical-errors-third-leading-cause-of-death-in-america.html (15 November 2019).
Drug-induced deaths: https://www.worstpills.org/public/page.cfm?op_id=5
(15 November 2019), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25355584 (15 November 2019)
and https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2016/06/16/peter-c-gotzsche-prescription-drugs-are-the-third-leading-cause-of-death/ (15 November 2019).
[20] See, for example, https://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/18/health/opioid-crisis-fast-facts/index.html (15 November 2019) and
https://www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids/opioid-overdose-crisis (15 November 2019).

bodies throughout the whole process[21], and then for childhood, by parents seeking to avoid the increasing anaesthetisation of children's vitality with drugs. People are once again relying more on their own healing capacities (e.g. fever, nutrition and exercise) than on medical advice. The most interesting and effective initiatives are breaking free of the dominant notions of health and disease and even body and mind while nurturing autonomous healing practices. People are returning to familial and communal therapeutic traditions while avoiding rigid fundamentalisms, thus seeking to heal themselves from what is currently called "health".[22]

Dwelling

Public and private development projects — and the urban and environmental disasters they produce — continue unabated. Gentrification is spreading, while growing numbers of people lack homes. Yet at the same time, self-construction practices are being consolidated and strengthened. "Transition towns", where the people take radical decisions to transform the urban environment, proliferate, squatter movements are expanding and new struggles are bringing to the city the spirit of the actions taken in the countryside. Highly diverse movements and initiatives have sprung up to resist the inertia of urban life and change dominant patterns. By reorganising daily life, people are recovering self-mobility: on foot or by bicycle, they are re-establishing family life, strengthening community spirit and taking back control of their own lives. Habitat International Coalition (HIC) is a very good

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[21] See, for, example Johanson et al. 2002 and the essay Medicalisation of Childbirth in Western Society https://skemman.is/bitstream/1946/11156/1/Mannfræði%20BA%20ritgerð%20-%20Oddný%20Vala%20Jónsdóttir.pdf (15 November 2019). The movement is not documented fully in those areas where it seems to be stronger, namely in different regions of the Global South.

[22] What Doctors Don't Tell You is a British magazine that regularly provides very solid information about problems with the medical establishment and the many alternatives available: https://pocketmags.com/us/what-doctors-dont-tell-you-magazine-2?gclid=Cj0KCQiAn8nuBRCzARIsAJcdIfOCnnyVJLWbUPx1bLpMuZmN5dRqsyL5qswz3D9lMph9-U4o4bPAErkaArO-EALw_wcB&gclsrc=aw.ds (18 November 2019).

source of information on what is happening in this domain.[23]

In all spheres of everyday life, many people are manifesting new attitudes, well rooted within their physical and cultural contexts, as they transform their habits and attitudes of **exchanging, playing** and **loving**. Many of these grassroots initiatives go beyond "ecological consciousness". They express an experience of a relationship with Mother Earth associated with the principles of respect and reciprocity. A new sense of responsibility is continually transforming production and consumption habits, catalysing the recovery of moral principles that have long been abandoned.

Friendships are being reclaimed, as their political nature becomes evident in the formation of new cells of social organisation. *Cariño* is becoming a political category, occupying a central place within new social relations that reject both the patriarchal and economic frames of society, which are inherently oppressive and abusive.

There is a wealth of online resources about these changes. They highlight both the initiatives themselves and a series of publications describing and analysing them. Useful resources include Beautiful Solutions[24], Radical Ecological Democracy (RED)[25], the Commons Strategies Group[26], Vikalp Sangam[27] and Pluriverse: A Postdevelopment Dictionary (Kothari et al. 2019).

The Global Tapestry of Alternatives, an initiative that was made public in May 2019, aims to identify and link initiatives that challenge the dominant system at local, regional and national levels, thus encouraging mutual learning, solidarity and political articulation. It intends to contribute to the formation of a critical mass of initiatives rebuilding collective life worldwide in line with new

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[23] HIC, with offices in more than a hundred countries on five continents, offers active support to all kinds of initiatives in housing and urban settlements, sharing the enormous experience it has accumulated over 30 years of intense activity. It is an independent alliance of social movements, community-based organisations, support groups and academics. Its records are an excellent illustration of the dynamism of the current grassroots movement that seeks to create appropriate access to livelihood, pluralism and the preservation of social, natural, historic and cultural patrimony.

[24] https://solutions.thischangeseverything.org (15 November 2019).

[25] http://www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/

[26] http://commonsstrategies.org/who-we-are/(15 November 2019).

[27] http://www.vikalpsangam.org (15 November 2019).

principles.[28]

Reformulating social and political horizons

Grassroots initiatives all over the world are already a form of social existence that radically reformulates political horizons.

Beyond patriarchy

The very root of all dominant systems is to be found in thousands of years of patriarchy. Many people are now aware of how patriarchal patterns have become "normalised" in modern society and must be challenged in all their manifestations. The struggle to anchor people's rule should dismantle the highly patriarchal structures of the "democratic" nation-state.

Patriarchy has always implied a hierarchical order, established by men, in which their control and domination operate under the assumption that their artificial constructions are better than natural, living creations and that the latter must therefore be destroyed and replaced. Such order implies tyranny or oligarchy. Ongoing initiatives seek to recover a different narrative, celebrating life and restoring a respectful relationship with Mother Earth. Launched in Germany in 2010, the Planetary Movement for the Pachamama, for example, seeks explicitly to protect Mother Earth, drawing inspiration from the ideas of Rosalie Bertell (2000) and Claudia von Werlhof (von Werlhof 2011; Bennholdt-Thomsen et al. 2001; Mies et al. 1988).[29] The experiences of the Zapatistas and the Rojava Kurds are well known, but there are many other initiatives, exemplifying an array of different approaches (as discussed in Pluriverse, Kothari et al. 2019). Most of these initiatives, like Vikalp Sangam in India and Crianza Mutua in Mexico and Colombia, put concern for life at the centre of social organisation and insist on the elimination of every hierarchy, every system of command, control and subordination, thus dismantling "democratic"

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[28] www.globaltapestryofalternatives.org (15 November 2019).

[29] http://emanzipationhumanum.de/downloads/pachamama.pdf 15/11/2019.

oppression, abuses and oligarchic structures from the bottom up.

A central issue in this struggle is the de-patriarchalisation of small groups and communities. Patriarchal domination, with its violence and oppression, began in small communities, and even within families. Some of the worst expressions of patriarchal domination are observed in small communities, even now.

The nation-state and the rule of law have often been promoted and justified as means of eliminating, or at least mitigating, such patriarchal patterns. It has also been assumed that the universalisation of human rights could solve many local forms of oppression and discrimination.[30] However, neither the rule of law nor human rights have been able to eradicate power abuses in small communities. In some cases, their implementation has actually aggravated abuses. What I am suggesting here is that many grassroots activists now have different agendas. They may still involve themselves in struggles at a national or international scale, particularly with a view to resisting the current wave of protofascist authoritarianism.[31] However, many of them are now concentrating on local-level transformations, necessarily associated with horizontal alliances and coalitions with other like-minded people. This seems to be the best path for dealing with local power abuses.

In an increasing number of cases, women are taking the lead in reformulations of the struggle. A careful analysis of Zapatista communiqués in recent years may serve as an illustration of this shift.[32] On 25 April 2018, at the end of a ten-day Zapatista event featuring a series of intense conversations, Yásnaya Aguilar, a Mixe woman, succinctly set out the new agenda. She explained that 25 years ago, it had been important to adopt the slogan "Never

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[30] There is a general assumption that the proper enforcement of human rights will remedy power abuses, violence and oppression that cannot be eliminated at the local level.
[31] In some countries, the majority still express the people's position through political parties, leaders or votes. In some cases, an electoral majority may express subordination to authoritarian rule and the political struggle entails horizontal confrontation among different groups.
[32] http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx (28 September 2019). See, in particular, the information on women's meetings and initiatives.

again a Mexico without us" in the creation of the National Indigenous Congress. In doing so, the Congress's founders denounced the fact that Indigenous peoples had been marginalised from the construction of the new nation-state for 200 years. Today, she explained, the agenda was different: "As I understand it, the Zapatistas have moved beyond 'never again a Mexico without us' and are now seeking an us without Mexico,"[33] a position that nevertheless does not imply any form of separatism.

Yásnaya Aguilar also exemplifies a shift that, in Oaxaca, has been called "the feminisation of politics". For example, the patriarchal structures of government in most of the 12,000 Indigenous communities within the federal state have changed.[34] Their hope for de-patriarchalisation is now deposited at the local level, rather than at the national or international level. They use judicial procedures and defend their rights while also acknowledging that human rights can serve as a Trojan horse for re-colonisation (Esteva 1998).

Localised, well-rooted efforts are gradually breaking with the dominant, patriarchal regime. Such efforts remain exposed to continuous harassment and open legal or illegal aggression. For instance, many communities have been forced to created specific alliances to defend their territories from transnational companies granted mining concessions by the government. They use judicial procedures to that end, but are nevertheless aware that in many cases, these will not be enough; only firm, active resistance will be capable of preventing dispossession. The people must also comply with bureaucratic impositions and

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[33] ¿Un nosotrxs sin México?, in https://radiozapatista.org/?tag=cideci (17 November 2019). See also https://pueblosencamino.org/?tag=yasnaya-aguilar (17 November 2019) and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=feR0PuN5-fg (17 November 2019).

[34] In these communities, which are governed through their assemblies, after recognising that women have been unable to attend assembly meetings and much less occupy positions of authority for a thousand years, men have recently taken the autonomous decision to allow women to participate in assemblies and in community government. This was not the result of a sudden epiphany among the communities' men, but rather the outcome of a long and courageous struggle by women. However, it has come at a cost: violence against women has increased. The women's struggle has also led to the adoption of a new law establishing the right of women to participate in assemblies and occupy positions of government, demonstrating that efforts to generate changes at the community level does not imply abandonment of the struggle at other levels.

depend on state apparatuses for various contextual and practical aspects, such as taxes, public services, traffic regulations, and so on. Increasingly, however, their own autonomous construction provides the framework that determines their modes of living.

Beyond development and the economic mentality

From its very emergence in the 1950s, the development enterprise implied a highly undemocratic imposition of the paradigmatic "*American way of life*". For some time, people resisted specific development projects affecting their lives or territories. Today, these people are already beyond development itself, in every sense. Alternative ways of thinking are now emerging (Escobar 1994; Esteva 1993, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2010b, 2010c).

In South America, the notion of *buen vivir* assumes the radical pluralism of forms of living well and highlights the importance of recovering local and cultural paths rooted in different traditions. However, this does not gel with the "democratic" nation-state, despite efforts in that direction, such as those undertaken in Bolivia and Ecuador (Acosta 2016; Alonso et al. 2015; Altmann 2014; Canqui 2011). Initiatives beyond development leave the conventional notions of "needs" and "consumption" behind, reframing the spirit of the commons in contemporary terms, in community entanglements and highly diverse configurations that affirm people's rule (Illich 2010 and Gutiérrez et al. 2011).

Modern economic thinking, a quintessential expression of the patriarchal world, is based on the logical premise of scarcity, assuming that the desires/needs/ambitions of humans are unlimited while their means/resources are limited. Therefore, a dispositive is required to allocate those limited means/resources to unlimited ends. This same dispositive defines the organising principles of modern societies and normalises patriarchal, undemocratic, oppressive patterns. Abandoning this framework implies adopting and embracing the premise of sufficiency, while trusting in the gifts of natural abundance and renouncing the very notion of "resources" (Shiva 2010),

as people are doing everywhere at the grassroots. In southern Mexico, many communities call their way of being in the world *comunalidad*: it respects sufficiency as a moral and practical principle of social organisation, rooted in people's rule (see Meyer/Maldonado 2010 and Guerrero 2019). Similarly, contemporary feminist and ecological movements in both urban and rural settings are restoring similar principles as norms of living. Such traits are common in autonomic movements in Latin America (Esteva 1998, 2001, 2003; Luisetti/Pickles/Kaiser 2015; Dinerstein 2015). In all these cases, a radical rejection of the oligarchic and oppressive elements of the dominant society has taken place, making way for people's rule.

Beyond the tyranny of scale

Warning in the 1950s that ongoing economic fluctuations were no longer business cycles but size cycles, Leopold Kohr argued that economic activities had reached a scale beyond the possibility of human control. Yet institutional efforts tend to respond to every crisis by increasing the scale of control, thus aggravating the very problems they intend to resolve. Instead of more centralisation and unification, insisted Kohr, what was needed was the "cantonisation" of economic activities. Rather than tackling the destructive force of oceanic waves in the open sea, we need to act at the scale of ponds, whose ripples do not destroy (Kohr 1992; Illich 1994).

Kohr's social morphology reminds us that a mouse the size of an elephant will collapse, as will an elephant the size of a mouse: both would be victims of disproportionality. Proportionality is a central feature for both natural and social beings. Size and proportionality go hand in hand, but not mechanically. For the people to rule themselves, each group must have the political capability to look after the common good together, through consensus. This can be achieved by relatively big groups in Indigenous communities, as

they are familiar with the tradition of "we-ing".[35] Conversely, only fairly small groups of individualised urbanites can have such political capabilities, at least at present.

People at the grassroots know all this from experience and common sense, despite the constant discourse on the need of "scale up" and address global urgencies, which devaluates the transformative potential of the local. Instead of trying to construct dispositives or organisations with national or international scope, autonomous initiatives focus on that which is within their reach. They construct collective and communal agreements that recover a sense of limits and proportionality. They are increasingly certain that global thinking is impossible (Berry 1991). Only destruction can occur on a global scale. And they know from experience that they can no longer rely on national and international apparatuses and norms. They have already adopted an alternative horizon (Esteva 2007, 2009, 2010a)

Localisation means going beyond both localism and globalisation. Initiatives are localised, but not locked into their contexts. They are open to other similar nuclei, to bonding with each other and generating coalitions and alliances for mutual learning, defence, solidarity and even political articulation without adopting national, international or global perspectives to guide their actions. They use such connections strategically to deal with their continual conflicts with corporations or the state.

As diverse initiatives collide and conjoin, it becomes necessary to construct stable forms for harmonious interaction at various scales. Options that avoid bureaucratic and centralised structures of power are being creatively considered and practised for that purpose. By way of example, the National

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[35] As Panikkar (1979) lucidly explained, we are knots in nets of relationships usually constructed as individuals. This condition defines how many Indigenous peoples see themselves and experience reality. Among the Tojolabal people in Southern Mexico, there are no words for "I" and "you": they "we" all the time. "On the Tojolabal side, we find community and the complement of the *we*, while the Western side stands for competitivity and the I. These imply two of the organizational principles of society." (Lenkensdorf 2002).

Indigenous Congress of Mexico, which links thousands of dispersed communities belonging to different peoples and cultures and speaking different languages, adopted the following principle: "we are an assembly when we are together; we are a web when we are separated". The Congress has been in operation for 25 years without any central office, leaders or bureaucratic structures. Via Campesina follows a similar approach.

The critical point is to reduce the need for coordination or norms at a national or international scale. People can coordinate themselves in all their endeavours and thus eliminate the requirement for someone or something to coordinate them, thereby avoiding subordination and control. Moreover, to orient collective efforts at a non-local scale, it is not necessary to define a specific political embodiment in advance or adopt a certain doctrine or design. Bridges are built when the time comes to cross them.

From 6 to 11 September 2019, a gathering took place in Iceland to reflect on different forms of radical democracy, with examples from different parts of the world. The participants discussed the new political strategies of grassroots groups, particularly the diverse ways in which communities and movements can organise their collective defence in the current circumstances and interact harmoniously and convivially in local, regional and even national spaces. Members of very different networks and movements reflected intensively on democratic confederalism, libertarian municipalism and communalism (Bookchin 2006; Biehl 2018) and other political tools for interaction without abandoning the horizontality and democratic elements constructed at the grassroots.[36]

The Global Tapestry of Alternatives and the Iceland meeting are excellent examples of current efforts to find ways to link people's initiatives with each other, both avoiding the need to build bureaucratic or representative structures and eschewing doctrinarian dogmas or utopic promised lands.

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[36] https://democraticconfederalism.earth/contact-us/ (15 November 2019).

New pathways

The efforts of an increasing number of people challenging dominant regimes open a path towards radically diverse new modes of living. They imply political attitudes that break with the conventional past but are rooted in tradition and experience.

"Society as a whole" is always the product of a multitude of factors, phenomena and forces. It cannot be programmed; strictly speaking, even the concept itself is devoid of any real meaning. These ongoing initiatives are conceived with neither a general nor a global change in mind, but with a sense of scale and proportion. They are conceived with the conviction that what they are constructing will be, as the Zapatistas suggested, a world in which many worlds can be embraced. They abandon all Leninist eagerness to be the *avant-garde*, leading the masses to some promised land. They reject the elites' obsession with progress and development. And while packing as much past and future as they can into the present, they express the conviction that the survival of the human species depends on recovering hope as a social force (Illich 1971: 106).

The initiatives under way are shaped beyond reform and revolution. Instead, they use new stories that firmly sweep away the old myths and integrate past and present into a coherent conception that may shed light on the steps to follow. They change ways of changing, transgressing cultural boundaries. They create new opportunities for emancipation and trace the shape and limits of new modes of living. Representing a renaissance of the democratic idea, people are really governing themselves, while leaving behind the corruption incarnated in all modern and contemporary "democracies" and "democratic" nation-states.

Pathways to new political horizons — to people's direct, unmediated self-governance — are opening. The time to celebrate has come.

San Pablo Etla, December 2019

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